

Marital Cruelty In Antebellum America

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Review

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Sager, Robin C. *Marital Cruelty in Antebellum America*. LSU Press, \$48.00
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DUTY OVER LOVE: CHARGES OF CRUELTY IN ANTEBELLUM DIVORCE

In *Marital Cruelty in Antebellum America*, Robin C. Sager looks at over 1500 divorce cases from Virginia, Texas, and Wisconsin from 1840 to 1860 and argues that antebellum Americans understood and valued their marriages in terms of gendered duties rather than through the ideal of compassionate marriage. It has been well established by previous historians, such as Nancy Cott, Norma Basch, and Hendrik Hartog, that ideas about marriage and especially divorce were changing around midcentury. Sager takes all of these changes into account and separates the ideal of compassionate marriage from the reality of marriage for those seeking divorce on the grounds of cruelty. Sager does so by investigating not only how marital cruelty was defined by the states, but also how Americans themselves defined marital cruelty in the courtroom.

The charges of cruelty in antebellum marriage covered a range of offenses. The first four chapters of this work each focus on a specific type of cruelty which includes: verbal cruelty, physical cruelty, sexual cruelty, and cruelty associated with drunkenness and neglect. The final chapter looks at the role and intervention of the community these cases of divorce on the grounds of cruelty. Perhaps the most significant aspect of Sager's work is her attention and analysis of divorce cases in which the wife was the one accused of cruelty. Except in what have been considered rare or exceptional cases, historians have been slow to recognize women as perpetrators of violence. In an attempt to help correct the assumption that only men were violent, Sanger highlights examples of women acting behaving cruelly toward their husbands through their speech, their fists, and in their drunken sprees.

A main goal of Sager's work is to compare three distinct regions in order to gain insight as to whether the South's reputation for violence impacted divorces granted on charges of cruelty in any significant way. Sager chose Virginia to represent the established South, Texas to represent a southern version of a frontier region, and Wisconsin to represent a northern frontier region. In comparing both frontier regions to the established Southern state of Virginia, Sager argues that gender roles were much more unstable and therefore, were able to be challenged more directly in both frontier regions. As a result, these instances of marital cruelty in Texas and Wisconsin were very much reflections of these gender instabilities. However, the main distinction Sager finds between Texas and Wisconsin is that Texas, as a southern frontier region, was similar in many ways to Virginia, in that couples in both states viewed marital duty in terms of honor culture. As a result, Sager finds more instances of marital cruelty in the frontier regions but makes the distinction that much of the marital cruelty in Wisconsin was aimed at couples battling for power amidst gender instability, whereas marital cruelty in Texas was understood through honor culture despite gender instabilities. Overall, Sager makes a convincing argument as to how region impacted couples' understandings of their marital responsibilities according to gender roles, however, it raises questions about one region that Sager has omitted, the northeast. Although, the addition of the northeast could potentially double the length of this work, it might help tease out more of the differences between northern frontier and southern frontier. Including the northeast might also provide a clearer distinction between antebellum Americans in the North and the South in terms of their expectations in marriage, as well as how they defined marital cruelty.

Overall, *Marital Cruelty in Antebellum America* makes a considerable contribution to the scholarship on marriage, divorce, and domestic violence in nineteenth-century America. Most importantly, Sager's emphasis on the fact that women were also perpetrators of domestic violence and cruelty gets us one step closer to what life was really like in Antebellum America.

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